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THE PRESENTATION OF BIBLICAL STORIES TO CHILDREN

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In presenting biblical stories to children, whether in the home or in the Sunday class, the paramount aim of the parent or teacher must be to bring the spirit of the story home to the mind of the child, that is, to present the story in such a way, that not the mere occurrences and details will remain in his memory, but rather the essence of the story will become, as it were, a part of his own experience. Obviously, as corollary of this, it follows that the lesson imparted will not be in the shape of a formal moral, drawn from the narrative, but rather of an effect—I would say largely aesthetic—upon the child's mind and heart, an effect which will remain with him as an unconscious guide and motive force in his own conduct. How is this end to be attained?

In the first place, it is of supreme importance that the language of the story and its literary form in general be adhered to as closely as possible. It is a fact that in every literary product of worth, form and contents are closely though subtly interdependent. The thought demands a certain mode of expression. It creates a vehicle for itself, and this, which we call the literary form, adds, in its turn, an indefinable flavor or association to the thought, throws on it a certain light which often constitutes the effectiveness of the whole.

In the light of this fact the necessity of proper regard for the literary form of the biblical stories is obvious. But this principle, which is accepted without question in the case of one of Aesop's fables, or of Grimm's fairy-tales, has, it would seem, in the opinion of the average Sunday-school teacher, no application to a story from the Bible. On the contrary, there seems to be at present a rather widespread view that the biblical stories must be adapted to the mind of the child, and that, in the form of presentation, the less they resemble their

¹ A paper read before the Jewish Religious Education Association of Ohio.



F. Kirchbach

JESUS, THE FRIEND OF CHILDREN

originals, the better they serve the purpose of fostering religious sentiments in the youthful mind.

In order to show the fallacy of this view and to substantiate my plea for a return to the spirit and language of the biblical stories, it will be necessary, first of all, to briefly consider these stories in regard to their literary character and aesthetic value.

I

Almost a century and a half ago, Johannes Winckelmann pointed out the fundamental aesthetical law governing all works of art and literature, and as the principle then established by him has stood the test to the present day, I cannot do better than quote his words here, before applying his principle to the biblical narratives. He says:

All beauty is heightened by unity and simplicity, as is everything which we do and say; for whatever is great in itself is elevated, when executed and uttered with simplicity. It is not more strictly circumscribed, nor does it lose any of its greatness, because the mind can survey and measure it with a glance, and comprehend and embrace it in a single idea; but the very readiness with which it may be embraced places it before us in its true greatness, and the mind is enlarged, and likewise elevated, by the comprehension of it. Everything which we must consider in separate pieces, or which we cannot survey at once from the number of its constituent parts, loses thereby some portion of its greatness, just as a long road is shortened by many objects presenting themselves on it or by inns at which a stop can be made. The harmony which ravishes the soul does not consist in arpeggios and tied and slurred notes, but in simple, long-drawn tones. This is the reason why a large palace appears small, when it is overloaded with ornament, and a house large, when elegant and simple in its style.²

In accordance with this, it will be seen that the biblical stories are masterpieces of narration, combining, as they do, depth of thought and of emotion with wonderful directness and simplicity of form. In this lofty simplicity of presentation, which is characteristic of true art even as of the works of nature, lie, undoubtedly, the strength and the charm of the biblical narratives, their special effectiveness for the purpose of religious teaching.

With a few simple strokes situations are presented, and actions and characters masterfully developed. The events narrated follow each other in rapid succession, and at no point of the narration is the

² *History of Ancient Art*, translated from the German by G. Henry Lodge, I, 310 f.

progress retarded, and our attention distracted by ornamental description or accessory details. Far from there being any diffuseness or prolixity, there is in these narratives often rather an abruptness, an omission of the connecting links which is fairly puzzling to the reader of today. The elimination of everything non-essential and subordinate adds necessarily to the vividness and force of the story. What is left unsaid, makes what is said more impressive.

It is this simplicity of narration, which stirs the heart and fires the imagination, that makes the biblical narratives a storehouse of wisdom and suggestiveness to the mature thinker, as well as ready food for the eager mind of the child. And it is this simplicity, finally, which, as it has made the Bible, as a whole, the classical book of religious experience, makes the biblical stories in particular a fitting vehicle for the inculcation of that great truth which their authors meant them to illustrate, that religion not only ennoble man's life, but gives it worth and purpose.

Almost any one of the biblical stories would serve equally well to illustrate this typical simplicity of style and aesthetic effectiveness, but let us refer briefly here to the story of Joseph, which of all the biblical stories is perhaps the one best known and oftenest related to children. Justly so, since the variety of incident and of emotion involved in this story makes it particularly rich in dramatic effect.

The story opens without preamble of any sort, unfolding at the very outset, the ill-boding situation in Jacob's household, which contains the germ of all that follows. We see first the strained relation among the brothers created by Jacob's open preference of Joseph. Then follow the disastrous, but natural, consequences of the father's partiality, Joseph's increasing vanity and self-importance and the evergrowing hatred and jealousy of his brethren, culminating in their cruel betrayal of him.

All is concise, vivid, dramatic. The necessary element of pathos is added to the account by Joseph's unsuspectingness, revealed in his solicitude for his brothers when he fails to find them in the expected place. "I seek my brethren," he answers the stranger, "tell me, I pray thee, where they are pasturing their flocks."

Then there is the contrast between Reuben's affection, his plans to save Joseph, and his despair at his disappearance, and the unnatural

cruelty of the other brothers, and, finally, there is the anguish of the bereaved father who refuses to be comforted.

Note the complexity of feelings appealed to because of the various human passions involved—love and jealousy, hatred and cruelty, remorse and grief. Note especially all that is left to the imagination to supply. The modern story-writer would have made a strong point of describing in detail the scene of Joseph's betrayal and his subsequent experiences among the Midianitish traders. But there is not a word of all this here. We have simply the bald, uncolored statement that "the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's and captain of the guard."

In this first chapter we have seen Joseph, the favorite son, the untried youth in his father's household, Joseph the dreamer; in the second, we are shown Joseph a slave in Egypt, the trusted, responsible servant, overseer in the household of Potiphar. Thrown upon his own resources and tried by suffering, the youth has become a man.

The process of adjustment to his new conditions; as were the details of his parting and journey, are left to the imagination of the reader. We are not told that he repined under the unwonted toil and hardships he had to endure as slave, neither that he yearned for his father and his home. All that we are told at this point is that "the Lord was with him and made all that he did to prosper in his hand."

"The Lord was with him, and made all that he did to prosper in his hand." That is all, but here we have the key to Joseph's character and the whole second chapter in a nutshell. We are told in effect that Joseph took up his new life and his new work with a will, that he put his soul into his work. For only when a man puts his soul into his work can it prosper and be worth while. Joseph evidently was diligent and conscientious, zealous and capable, and his master, seeing his spirit and the quality of his work, knew that he could trust him. Wisely he placed him at the head of his household, "and all that he had he put into his hand," and we are not surprised to read that "the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake, and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house and in the field."

The proof of Joseph's inherent nobility of character is given in his attitude to his master's wife when she seeks to seduce him.

Reminding her how implicitly his master trusts him, he declares, "How, then, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God!" And, though she pursues him with her wiles, he hearkens not to her temptings. His responsibility is equal to his trust.

Thrown into prison, Joseph, we are given to infer, does not brood over the injustice done him in that he has been made to suffer for his honor and virtuousness. With the strength of a great character he adjusts himself to his new life and wins the respect and the love of his new associates. That he showed himself kind and sympathetic to his fellow-prisoners, as also trustworthy and capable in his work, we know, inasmuch as we are told: "The Lord was with Joseph and made men's hearts incline to him and gave him favor in the eyes of the keeper of the prison, and the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison, and looked not to anything that was under his hand, and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper."

The remainder of the Joseph-story satisfies our sense of fitness and dramatic effect in like manner. And take any other story you please, that of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Naomi and Ruth, Paradise, Cain, Balak and Balaam, Abimelech, or Samson, it is the same; each is a type of its own, mirroring life, beautiful or wretched, as the case may be, but always searching the depths of the human soul. What makes them all perfect types of narration is the characteristic above alluded to, that everything foreign to the unity of the story, everything that would tend to mar the harmonious simplicity of the whole is absent. The biblical narratives do not bear the didactic stamp, as do, e.g., the narratives of the Hindu literature which have so often been extolled for their pedagogical value. The progress of the biblical narratives is never interrupted by moral reflections or discourses as in the case of the Hindu stories; and it is precisely this feature which gives them their superior pedagogical worth; for the power of a work of art or literature to carry our soul away, to stimulate a love of all that is noble and beautiful, or arouse horror and loathing of all that is low, will be the greater, the more harmonious the unity of its diverse parts, the more imperceptibly these merge into one another.

In the Hindu narrative literature, the constant deviations from direct narration caused by the pronounced didactic tendency, makes

these stories tiresome, and produce just the opposite effect of that at which their authors aimed. When the aesthetic effectiveness of a story is destroyed, the moral effect is bound to suffer too.

Not diffuseness and expatiation, but concentration and suggestiveness are the secret of literary effectiveness. Exhaust the subject from every viewpoint, say everything that is possible to be said, and the reader is left cold, probably bored; stimulate his thought, stir his imagination, let him draw his own deductions from the material you have provided, and the story is part of him for all time.

In the story of Joseph it is noticeable, as I have already pointed out, that there is no description of the scene of Joseph's betrayal, no reference to his suffering in the pit, to his pleadings when sold to the passing slave-traders, in fact, to any of the circumstances of his sale and departure; nor is it mentioned that the brothers suffered remorse for their evil deed, or that their guilt weighed heavily on them during the years that followed. But could any detailed description give the reader such a picture of Joseph's suffering and the brothers' remorse as does the passage later on in the story, which relates how, when Joseph after the lapse of years has requested his brethren to bring Benjamin to him in Egypt, they said to one another, conscience-stricken, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this disaster come upon us."

II

Since the language and style of the Bible are so effective, it follows that any departure therefrom must seriously interfere with the impression produced. It goes without saying that the biblical stories cannot always be related verbatim to children. Circumlocutions or omissions, as the case may demand, must sometimes be made. The judgment of the parent or teacher must here be his guide, but all deviations should be made with deference to the spirit of the whole.

Brief interspersions are also occasionally necessary in order that the child may grasp the logical sequence of the situations or happenings narrated, and that the various interlaced parts of the story may bear the proper proportion and significance to his mind.

These interspersions are necessary because of the peculiarity of the biblical, or more correctly the oriental, style, hinted at above, a peculiarity which to the occidental mind is at once strange and misleading, that of the abrupt thought-transitions, the juxtaposition of ideas where not coincidence is to be understood, but sequence. Occidental literature tolerates no sudden transitions; each link in the chain of thought must be given, and given in its proper sequence, and each situation be developed out of the preceding one. But in oriental literature, quite frequently, the thoughts are joined to one another in an aphoristic manner, the author relying on the reader to discern the association of ideas which leads from one thought to the other. Similarly, in the progress of narration, situation is added to situation in much the same way as a series of events is depicted by a novelistic painter. Like the latter, the oriental writer depends on his readers or audience to see the proper relation or sequence of the various situations.³

Thus, to illustrate from the story of Joseph, Joseph's dreams, though prelude to his future elevation, have still another connection in the story. They are to be understood as emanating, like his action of carrying tales on his brothers, from the feeling of self-importance fostered in him by the unwise favoritism shown him by his father. This the author made sufficiently clear for the oriental mind by the rebuke he puts in the mouth of the father, on the occasion of Joseph's second dream: "What dream is this thou hast been dreaming? Shall we, I, thy mother, and thy brothers be expected to come and bow down before thee to the ground?"

Again, whereas the first chapter ends with the simple statement that Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, the second chapter presents Joseph as a man of the most highly developed character, who makes his worth felt in every situation, faithful and conscientious in his stewardship, sympathetic and gentle toward those under him in prison, modest yet commanding as he appears before Pharaoh. Not a word of explanation to account for the period of trial and development that must have intervened! That trial has brought out the best

³ This feature of oriental style can be here only briefly referred to although it is of great importance in biblical interpretation. I expect to deal with it more fully in a commentary on Job which I have in preparation.

in Joseph and made a man of the petted youth, we are, as we have seen, justified in inferring, but we are not told.

This juxtaposition of the various stages in the development of the story is perfectly clear to the oriental mind, thinking as it does by leaps and bounds, or to the occidental mind which has become accustomed to the oriental style; but to the mind of the child it naturally presents many difficulties. It is here that the teacher must come to the aid of the pupil by skilfully filling in the gap and establishing the proper sequence. Any explanatory remarks, however, must be in keeping with the style and spirit of the story, must be concise and cogent, and bear due regard to the aesthetic effect of the whole. Thus it would be amiss to enter into a detailed description of the privation and hardships Joseph had to suffer as Potiphar's slave or while in prison. Any diffuse description of minor points is sure to mar the unity of the story; and, as already stated, it is just the absence of such descriptions and of irrelevant, though accessory, details that makes the biblical stories pre-eminently fitted to stir up moral and religious sentiments in the child.

It follows from this also that it is a mistake to think the moral of the story must in each case be emphasized, and that constant reference must be made to the practical application of the story to the child's sphere of interest. Just the opposite is, in fact, the case.

Literature, like the other arts, produces moral effects through the medium of the aesthetic sense. We are made to realize the beauty of a noble, virtuous life, and we desire to possess it in ourselves. We are led to feel the loathsomeness of meanness and vice, and the dislike of such becomes ingrained in us. Thus through the biblical stories, right feeling on moral questions is nourished unconsciously; even as all a child's habits are acquired unconsciously, and his leanings determined.

Character in the young, it cannot be too often repeated, is most naturally influenced by example, by example which appeals to them and stirs them, consciously or unconsciously, to imitation. The authors of the biblical stories were wise pedagogues to rely altogether on this effect. One need only watch the child's face when a biblical story or, for that matter, any story of a high moral type is well told, to be convinced of his ready moral response.

In conclusion, let me recall that famous utterance of Alexander von Humboldt (if I may trust my memory): "If we had not the Bible, we would have to produce it." We have the Bible. Let us give it to our children—not give it to them in poor counterfeits and stilted moral paraphrases, but in its original simplicity, for in this lofty simplicity, as we started out by saying, lie both its charm to please and its power to influence. Let us present the biblical stories to our children intelligently, so that they will become their own, so that the best in them will become ingrained in their spiritual being and be to them, consciously or unconsciously, an inspiration and a guide.